In Korea, Deterrence is Job Number One

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This month marks the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Korean War Armistice. While the hot phase of the conflict ended on July 27, 1953, when the battlefield commanders signed a truce accord, today the war remains unfinished business: no peace treaty has yet been signed. Tensions have ebbed and flowed along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) over the past half a century. The Korean Peninsula remains witness to an on-going standoff between two heavily armed adversaries: the Republic of Korea (ROK) in alliance with the United States confronting the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

A lot of talk in recent months has concerned redeploying and reconfiguring the 37,000 strong U.S. armed forces currently stationed on the Korean Peninsula. One of the changes under consideration is pulling back U.S. military personnel from along the DMZ. Commander of U.S. Forces in the Pacific Admiral Thomas B. Fargo has called the tripwire concept "antiquated."

U.S. forces stationed along the DMZ do indeed perform a "tripwire" function. They are there so that the North Korean People's Army (KPA) understands that, from the opening minutes of any attack across the DMZ, they will be at war with the most powerful armed forces in the world. That the U.S. military has successfully deterred the KPA is self-evident from the fact that there has been no major attack southward by Pyongyang since July 1953. American boots on the ground have proven to be a very visible and powerful deterrent to North Korea. While the tripwire concept certainly seems antiquated and indeed nonsensical in a strictly operational military context, from a broader political/strategic standpoint, the presence of U.S. troops at the DMZ appears critical to ensure the message of deterrence remains foremost in the KPA's political masters' minds.

According to Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, the drivers of these proposed changes are technological advances, organizational innovations, and the need for the U.S. armed forces to adapt to a more agile and mobile posture. The objective is to ensure that the U.S. military is able to respond more effectively to increasingly diverse and unpredictable threats in the region. These are significant factors but Pentagon defense planners must take more seriously into account the strategic calculus of our potential adversary on the Korean Peninsula and the impact of proposed changes on our friends and allies in the region. While the importance of these two factors has been acknowledged by Secretary Wolfowitz, the crucial twin tasks of deterring Pyongyang and strengthening Washington's alliance with Seoul do not appear to have received the level of attention they deserve.

Mid-2003 seems an inopportune time to discuss publicly major changes in force structure and positioning of U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK). The range of steps being discussed is likely to have serious unintended consequences, including increasing the probability of a military conflict on the peninsula. While longer-term modifications are undoubtedly necessary, making or planning unilateral changes now and focusing solely on operational level considerations seem unwise. Implementation of these adjustments risks being misunderstood by the DPRK and putting undue strain on our alliance with the ROK.

The single most important factor to be considered is North Korea's national security calculus: what are Pyongyang's capabilities and intentions? North Korea's domestic difficulties are well-known. The country is an economic basket case where millions have starved to death over the past decade, millions more suffer from malnutrition, and hundreds of thousands of

refugees have crossed into China. Despite these difficulties its military capabilities are substantial. North Korea--by its own admission--has managed to marshal the wherewithal and resources to single-mindedly pursue a nuclear weapons program. Moreover, less well-known to many Americans is the million-person-plus standing KPA that is well-armed and equipped with thousands of long-range artillery pieces forward deployed along the DMZ.

Less consensus exists as to North Korea's intentions. Yet, Pyongyang continues to profess its goal of unification, and military force is not ruled out to achieve this. North Korea's aims beyond immediate regime survival entail enhancing its security. In this regard, resuscitating its economy is essential and in Pyongyang's view this seems to entail improving relations with the United States. The goal of unification, meanwhile, involves driving a wedge between Washington and Seoul. The ultimate objective is to undermine and eventually destroy the alliance. North Korea appears to believe that the South Koreans are merely puppets of the Americans and with the U.S. military out of the way, Seoul would be ripe for the taking. Although this assumption is false, the outcome of this logic suggests any change in force size or positioning by USFK could easily be misinterpreted by Pyongyang and even trigger a military response by the KPA. North Korea has proved to be a wily and opportunistic bully always prepared to take calculated risks and engage in brinkmanship.

Pyongyang could easily interpret changes in positioning and force structure by the United States on the peninsula--and for that matter in Northeast Asia--in a number of different ways. These changes could be perceived as a lessening of U.S. commitment and/or providing a narrow window of opportunity for North Korea to defeat South Korea before the United States could respond. And Pyongyang could also read a pull back of U.S. forces from the DMZ as moving troops out of harms way in preparation for an American preemptive strike. Certainly the remarkable success of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM has had a profound effect on North Korea's leaders. If Pyongyang fears a U.S. preemptive strike is imminent, its leaders might conclude that their only course of action is to preempt the preemption.

The United States also must carefully consider the impact on our allies in the region, most importantly, South Korea. While Seoul has long been keen to relocate and consolidate U.S. bases, the South Korean Government is very uncomfortable about rapid change.

The current configuration of forward-based forces in U.S. Pacific Command merits constant reassessment and reevaluation based on changing conditions and evolving strategic priorities. But drastic changes in the coming months and years would not be prudent--barring the sudden collapse of North Korea--absent clear evidence of real changes in Pyongyang's capabilities and intentions.

A more strategic approach would be one tailored to addressing the specific and multifaceted security challenges of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. Pyongyang is eager to negotiate one-on-one with Washington. The Bush administration has rightly insisted that any talks be multilateral and wisely indicated that conventional forces should be included on the agenda. The United States, in conjunction with our South Korean allies and other friends in the region, should seize the opportunity offered by the current situation to present North Korea with a comprehensive package and road map to reduce tensions and gradually demilitarize the peninsula. Adjustments of U.S. and ROK militaries in terms of downsizing and redeployment away from the DMZ should be made contingent on parallel and verifiable adjustments by the North Korean armed forces on the other side of the DMZ. In the meantime, for the United States and the Republic of Korea, deterrence remains job number one.